

University of Wollongong

## Research Online

---

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -  
Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

---

1-1-2013

### On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian Century

Sukhmani Khorana

University of Wollongong, [skhorana@uow.edu.au](mailto:skhorana@uow.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Khorana, Sukhmani, "On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian Century" (2013). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 1545.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1545>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian Century

### Abstract

We are fortunate to have bipartisan political support for enhancing trade and cultural links with our region in the so-called Asian Century. But do we have similar consensus when dealing with those from Asia who have found a temporary or permanent home in Australia?

According to the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia is now home to nearly 2 million people of Asian origin. Moreover, they are on the brink of overtaking European-born migrants for the first time in the nation's history. Also of significance is that this crop has been recruited largely from students and skilled migrants, thereby distinguishing them from previous "waves".

### Keywords

asian, century, killjoy, being, ethnic

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

### Publication Details

Khorana, S. (2013). On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian Century. *The Conversation*, (20 November)

20 November 2013, 10.38am AEST

# On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian Century

Author



[Sukhmani Khorana](#)

[Lecturer in Digital and International Media at University of Wollongong](#)

## Disclosure Statement

Sukhmani was the Chair of the organising committee for the conference 'Gondwanalandings: Voices of the Indian Diaspora in Australia', and is also a current co-convenor of the Asian Australian Film Forum and Network (AAFFN).

UNIVERSITY OF  
WOLLONGONG



[uow.edu.au](http://uow.edu.au)

Provides funding as a [Member](#) of The Conversation.



We should attempt to get cultural diversity right in our own backyard. Alam Singh

We are fortunate to have bipartisan political support for enhancing trade and cultural links with our region in the so-called [Asian Century](#). But do we have similar consensus when dealing with those from Asia who have found a temporary or permanent home in Australia?

According to the [latest figures](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia is now home to nearly 2 million people of Asian origin. Moreover, they are on the brink of overtaking European-born migrants for the first time in the nation's history. Also of significance is that this crop has been recruited largely from students and skilled migrants, thereby distinguishing them from previous "waves".

Sydney recently played host to the first [Pravasi Bharatiya Divas](#) (Festival of Overseas Indians) in the Asia-Pacific region, and is also the city of choice for an [Intercultural Film Festival](#) that opened on November 14.

Despite these considerable steps, we remain a huge leap away from understanding and embracing the nuances of cultural diversity as a lived experience rather than as an exchange commodity, or a political token. Unless we attempt to get cultural diversity right in our own backyard, we cannot make the case for being a fruitful partner in our thriving region.

According to Australian cultural studies academic Sara Ahmed, a "[feminist killjoy](#)" (loosely speaking) is someone who openly declares war on patriarchal practices at the ostensibly peaceful site of the family dinner table. He/she seeks to expose the seemingly "happy housewife" as a fantasy figure who "erases the signs of labour under the sign of happiness".

I wonder if, in the Australian multicultural context, we similarly mask symptoms of intra- and inter-community discord through the figure of the assimilated, working ethnic person who shares his/her exotic lunchbox at the workplace but has little say in the corporate boardroom.

I would like to put forth the notion of the “ethnic killjoy” – someone who unapologetically asks difficult questions about the diversity of fellow “ethnics” and “non-ethnics” alike. Although there are countless associations representing specific ethnic groups in Australia, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest they often represent narrow interests that come at the cost of solidarity and political action.

Such a finding was reported in the Australia India Institute report [Beyond the Lost Decade](#) in 2012. That report highlighted that the Indian diaspora in Australia tended to fly under the radar and was far from being as politically active as its counterpart in the US.



Dan Peled/AAP

[Click to enlarge](#)

In response, I and some colleagues acted as bona fide “ethnic killjoys” by approaching the Institute to fund a [symposium](#) that brought critical, creative and community voices of this diaspora together on a single platform for the first time.

We were successful, and have hopefully set the stage for such difficult yet productive conversations to continue. Similar work is already being done by the [Asian Australian Studies Research Network](#), which also has a formidable record of bridging intellectual and community concerns regarding diversity.



With the myriad ethnic community festivals now taking place in Australian capital cities, there has been a proportionate rise in state and federal politicians of all persuasions paying visits to such sites (such as the above-mentioned Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which received the patronage of the NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell).

This is no less than paying homage to the nation's official [National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia](#) – especially in the face of recent European retreats from the same (such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel declaring that [multiculturalism has failed](#)).

But what if this agenda – which covers cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency – doesn't go far enough to ensure diversity? Is it possible to institutionalise people-to-people links that go beyond food and festivals?

How can this attempt at empathy (not just co-existence) extend to those trying to get to Australia to flee persecution?

## Empathy and multiculturalism

Let's rewind to Senator Bob Carr's appearance at the [Storyology conference](#) in Sydney in August. In conversation with Fairfax journalist Peter Hartcher, the then Foreign Minister declared that his [government's revised stance](#) on refugee arrivals by boat was just for all concerned.

We get 3000 people a month. It's already 20% of the migrant intake. We won't allow this number to be increased by people smugglers.

A lot of critics are extremely well meaning people but they fail to recognise that the recent spike in numbers is being contracted out to people smugglers.

Carr did not once allude to Australia's commitment to the [UNHCR Refugee Convention](#), which states that:

subject to specific exceptions, refugees should not be penalised for their illegal entry or stay. This recognises that the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules. Prohibited penalties might include being charged with immigration or criminal offences relating to the seeking of asylum, or being arbitrarily detained purely on the basis of seeking asylum. Importantly, the Convention contains various safeguards against the expulsion of refugees.

During the same interview, it was brought to light that the Minister planned to visit Vietnamese communities in Sydney's west as part of his election campaigning duties. He did not dare to refer to this group as former "boat people".

What would "ethnic killjoys" have asked of Senator Carr on the above occasion? Our questions entail open dialogue about the [family violence issues faced by culturally and linguistically diverse \(CALD\) women](#), the exploitation of overseas students and temporary visa holders by small business owners, and support for, and settlement of, refugees in a range of community settings, among others.

According to academic Jon Stratton, a number of non-white migrants entering Australia's middle class are tending towards "[honorary whiteness](#)" (also known as "model minority" in the US context).

He argues this not only alienates asylum seekers (as the "bad migrants" who cannot adopt "our" values), but also means that the acceptance of middle-class migrants is conditional on them "acting white".

Given this, most ethnic killjoys are aware their interventions are not going to make them popular with their own community, or with the political mainstream. But we feel compelled to bear the "[burden of representation](#)", as articulated by Black British artist Kobena Mercer. It is the only way towards a multicultural Australia geared to empathy rather than tolerance.